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ABSTRACT

This study investigated children's perceptions of effort expenditure in goal-related action. A total of 20 kindergartners, 23 second graders, and 25 fifth graders listened to 6 stories that depicted actors using various amounts of effort in pursuit of either a positive or negative goal. Children rated how much the actor wanted to reach the goal, and how much the actor tried to reach the goal. Children were also asked to offer reasons for their ratings. Results indicated that as their age increased, children showed a greater differentiation in ratings of actors' effort expenditures, and their ratings were less affected by positive or negative goal information. Children showed greater differentiation of actors due to effort expenditure in negative goal conditions than in positive goal conditions. The data related to reasoning indicated that, by the second grade, children mentioned quantitative features of action. However, only fifth graders mentioned qualitative features of action. Both ratings and reasoning data suggest developmental differences in children's attention to quantitative and qualitative features of action in others' judgments of an actor's degree of wanting and trying. (BC)

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PERSONAL EFFORT EXPENDITURE IN GOAL-RELATED ACTION: CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS OF WANTING AND TRYING IN INTERPERSONAL SITUATIONS

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ABSTRACT

The present study investigated children's perceptions of effort expenditure in goal-related action. Kindergarteners, second-graders, and fifth-graders heard a set of 6 judgment stories that depicted actors exerting effort while in pursuit of either a positive goal or a negative goal. Children used 2 separate rating scales to judge how much the actor wanted and tried to get the goal described in the story. Also, children were asked to offer reasons for their want and try ratings. Children's ratings differed significantly due to effort expenditure with increasing age. Also, goal valence information had less impact upon children's want and try ratings of actors with increasing age. In addition, children evidenced greater differentiation of actors due to effort expenditure in negative-goal conditions than in positive-goal conditions. Both the ratings data and the reasoning data suggest developmental differences in children's attention to both quantitative and qualitative features of action in want and try judgments of others. The findings are discussed in terms of age-related differences in children's perceptions of human action.

AIMS

1. The primary aim of the study was to investigate whether children make differential perceptions of trying and wanting from observable action (Heider,1958).

2. A second aim of the study was to investigate developmental differences in children's use of representations of effort expenditure depicted in action: one-attempt (OA), repeated attempts (RA), and equifinality (E). Differential ratings for the contrast OA vs. RA imply attention to quantitative features of action whereas, differential ratings for the RA vs. E contrast imply attention to qualitative features of action.

3. The third aim was to investigate (1) the possible role of goal valence information in children's judgments of wanting and trying; (2) developmental differences in children's attention to goal valence information; and (3) the impact of goal valence upon children's ratings of actors who differ in effort expenditure.

METHOD

SUBJECTS:

Sixty-eight children attending a parochial school participated in the study. There were 20 kindergarteners (10 boys and 10 girls), 23 second-graders (10 boys and 13 girls), and 25 fifth-graders (10 boys and 15 girls).

MATERIALS:

Judgment Stories: A set of six judgment stories were constructed. The set of judgment stories factorially combined 3 levels of effort expenditure (OA, RA, and E) and 2 levels of goal of actor (Positive and Negative). Two story themes were constructed; one featured girls (Swing Theme) and the other featured boys (Ball Theme). Thus, a total of 12 stories were constructed. Line drawings were made to accompany the story presentations.

Rating Scales: Two separate 5-point rating scales were constructed to assess children's want and try judgments. The rating scales were made of columns of increasing height (blue for want judgments and yellow for try judgments). The columns were labeled "a tiny bit" to "a whole lot". Children were taught to use each rating scale prior to hearing stories.

TASKS

1. Children heard a set of six stories. The stories were read one at a time and children recalled aloud what happened in each story.

2. After hearing the first story, children were asked to rate how much the actor wanted to pursue the goal. Children made their judgment on the rating scale. Children were asked to offer a reason for their want judgment.

3. Next, children were asked to rate how much the actor tried to pursue the goal. Children made their judgment on the rating scale. Children were asked to offer a reason for their try judgment.

Note: The order of assessing children's want and try judgments was counterbalanced. Want ratings were assessed first, followed by try ratings for the first story presented. Try ratings were assessed followed by want ratings for the second story presented, etc.

RESULTS

Scoring: Children's want and try ratings were assigned a score of 1 for "a tiny bit" to 5 for "a whole lot". T-tests were performed to test the hypotheses.

Want Ratings:

1. OA=RA (Ms=3.84 and 4.02); OA<E (Ms=3.84 and 4.27); RA<E
2. Kindergarteners: OA=RA=E
   2nd graders: OA<RA, t(126)=2.15, p<.025 OA<E, t(126)=1.95, p<.05
   5th graders: OA<E, t(126)=2.84, p<.005
   RA<E, t(126)=2.21, p<.025
3. PG>NG (Ms=4.17 and 3.92)
4. Kindergarteners: PG>NG, t(64)=1.75, p<.05
   2nd graders: PG>NG, t(64)=2.58, p<.01
   5th graders: PG=NG
5. OA<E in PG condition, t(63)=2.20, p<.025
   OA<RA, t(63)=2.50, p<.01; OA<E, t(63)=3.70, p<.005; RA<E, t(63)=6.20 p<.005 in NG condition
6. Kindergarteners : OA=RA=E in PG condition; OA<E, t(126)=2.89, p<.005 and RA<E, t(126) =2.63, p<.01 in NG condition
   2nd graders: OA=RA=E in PG condition; OA<RA, t(126)=4.00, p<.005 and OA<E, t(126)=4.00, p<.005 in NG condition
   5th graders: OA<E, t(126)=2.82, p<.005 in PG condition; OA<E, t(126)=3.52, p<.005 and RA<E, t(126)=3.52, p<.005 in NG condition

Try Ratings:

1. OA=RA (Ms=3.81 and 3.94); OA<E (Ms=3.81 and 4.27); RA<E
2. Kindergarteners: OA=RA=E
   2nd graders: OA<RA, t(126)=1.89, p<.05 OA<E, t(126)=2.00, p<.05
   5th graders: OA<E, t(126)=4.00, p<.001
   RA<E, t(126)=4.00, p<.001
3. PG>NG (Ms=4.21 and 3.80)
4. Kindergarteners: PG>NG, t(64)=2.86,

$p<.005$

2nd graders: PG>NG, $t(64)=3.25$, $p<.005$

5th graders: PG=NG

5. RA<E in PG condition, $t(63)=2.36$, $p<.025$

OA<RA, $t(63)=3.18$, $p<.005$; OA<E, $t(63)=3.63$, $p<.005$; RA<E, $t(63)=6.81p<.005$ in NG condition

6. Kindergarteners: RA<E, $t(126)=2.00$, $p<.025$ in PG condition; OA<RA, $t(126)=1.75$, $p<.05$ in NG condition

2nd graders: OA=RA=E in PG condition; OA<RA, $t(126)=3.52$, $p<.005$ and OA<E, $t(126)=4.05$, $p<.005$ in NG condition

5th graders: OA<E, $t(126)=2.00$, $p<.025$ and RA<E, $t(126)=2.44$, $p<.01$ in PG condition; OA<E, $t(126)=6.00$, $p<.005$ and RA<E, $t(126)=5.55$, $p<.005$ in NG condition

Summary of Reasoning Data

1. By the second-grade, children mentioned quantitative features of action (i.e., the number of times the actor pursued the goal).
2. Only fifth-graders mentioned qualitative features of action (i.e., the different ways in which the actor pursued the goal).
3. Second-graders tended to mention how many times equifinality actors pursued the goal, rather than the different ways in which the actor pursued the goal.
4. Kindergarteners and second-graders tended to mention goal-related features of action when offering reasons for their judgments.
5. Children, especially fifth-graders, made reference to "trying" when offering reasons for their judgments of repeated-attempt and equifinality actors.

Figure 1
Examples of Stimulus Stories

One-Attempt/Positive Goal

Don and this boy are playing catch with a ball. Don wants to help the boy catch the ball. Don throws the ball to the boy.

Repeated-Attempt/Negative Goal

Mary and this girl are playing on a swing. Mary wants the girl to fall from the swing. Mary pushes the swing. The girl does not fall from the swing. The next time, Mary pushes the swing just like before. The girl does not fall from the swing. This time, Mary pushes the swing just like before.

Equifinality/Negative Goal

Joe and this boy are playing catch with a ball. Joe wants to hit the boy with the ball. Joe throws the ball at the boy. The boy catches the ball. The next time, Joe throws the ball right at the boy's head. The boy reaches up and catches it. This time, Joe sees that the boy is not looking to catch the ball. Joe throws the ball at the boy.

Table 1

Mean Want Ratings at Each Grade Level as a Function of Effort Expenditure and Goal of Actor

	Grade Level		
	Kindergarten	Second	Fifth
Goal			
Positive			
One-Attempt			
Want	4.25	4.23	3.76
	(1.06)	(0.86)	(1.12)
Repeated-Attempt			
Want	4.15	4.36	4.00
	(1.04)	(0.78)	(0.81)
Equifinality			
Want	4.35	4.27	4.24
	(0.98)	(0.76)	(0.59)
Negative			
One-Attempt			
Want	3.70	3.32	3.84
	(1.52)	(1.32)	(1.28)
Repeated-Attempt			
Want	3.75	4.04	3.84
	(1.44)	(0.95)	(1.10)
Equifinality			
Want	4.25	4.04	4.44
	(1.06)	(1.04)	(0.65)

Note: Standard deviations are in parentheses.

Table 2

Mean Try Ratings at Each Grade Level as a Function of Effort Expenditure and Goal of Actor

	Grade Level		
	Kindergarten	Second	Fifth
Goal			
Positive			
One-Attempt			
Try	4.35	4.36	3.88
	(1.14)	(0.95)	(1.17)
Repeated-Attempt			
Try	4.10	4.45	3.80
	(1.33)	(0.60)	(0.96)
Equifinality			
Try	4.50	4.36	4.24
	(0.83)	(0.79)	(0.78)
Negative			
One-Attempt			
Try	3.50	3.27	3.52
	(1.60)	(1.16)	(1.16)
Repeated-Attempt			
Try	3.85	3.91	3.60
	(1.60)	(0.97)	(1.15)
Equifinality			
Try	3.80	4.04	4.60
	(1.36)	(1.00)	(0.36)

Note: Standard deviations are in parentheses.

CONCLUSIONS

1. An important contribution of this study is the finding that observable action leads to differential perceptions of how much an actor wants and tries to pursue a goal (Heider, 1958).

2. Children differentiate actors by effort expenditure with increasing age.

3. Children's differential ratings of actors tend to be based upon quantitative features of action (the number of times spent in goal pursuit) prior to qualitative features of action (different ways spent in goal pursuit).

4. Consistent with findings of moral judgment studies, this study found that goal valence information was particularly influential in the social judgments of kindergarten and second-grade children.

5. As expected, children's want and try judgments were more differentiated due to effort expenditure in negative goal conditions when compared to positive goal conditions.